

Sex and gender in Euripides' *Hippolytus*

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Hippolytus' rejection of sexual love will strike most – though not all – of us as very strange indeed. It is set in a dramatic world where the women bond with each other in sympathetic mutual support while the male solidarity of Hippolytus and his friends comes across as immature and limited. The play's conclusion, though deeply tragic, at least suggests the possibility of harmony between the male and female worlds.

Most of us in the twenty-first century will find it difficult to sympathize with Euripides' *Hippolytus* in his rejection of sexual love. It is true that there is today a growing number of young people who neither like nor want sex, who are glad to be a(sexual). *The Times* quotes one of them as saying, 'When I contemplate what sex involves, I think, ugh, why would I want to do that?' And the gay singer Boy George famously declared that he preferred a nice cup of tea to sex. Yet most of humanity would surely regard such attitudes as decidedly peculiar – and it is extremely probable that ancient Greeks would have viewed Hippolytus' avowal of male purity in the same light.

Phaedra's world: the world of women

Euripides' play polarizes the worlds of men and women in a way that exposes the inadequacy of Hippolytus' rejection of sex. To start with the women, we have of course to face the fact that things end disastrously for Phaedra. Yet the tragedy's human women are united in an impressive bond of mutual dependency and support. The female chorus tell us that they were engaged in women's work, drawing water or doing the laundry, when a friend told them of Phaedra's sickness (121–2). Their concern has led them to the palace to discover its cause. They have had children and experienced post-natal depression (161–9). They wonder whether this specifically gynaecological condition could be the cause of Phaedra's suffering. This sense of the women's mutual understanding and willingness to help is given further emphasis when the Nurse – whose commitment to her mistress's well-being, even if it leads to catastrophe, is total – assures Phaedra:

If you are suffering from an illness which cannot be spoken of [to men], there are women here to help to cure your sickness. (293–4)

Everyone on stage, she is saying, is a supportive woman. You can safely talk of a female complaint to us.

A further instance of female solidarity comes at 713–14 when the chorus swear to Phaedra that they will reveal nothing of what has happened to the light of day. The silence enforced on them by this oath will, of course, have tragic consequences. But they contribute to our feeling that Hippolytus' outburst just before (645–50) savaging the wicked schemes of women and their servants is hysterical and unfair. Unsurprisingly, he shows no appreciation of the valuable systems of mutual support in place for women, without which their lives would be unendurable.

Hippolytus' world

There is, of course, an equivalent solidarity in Hippolytus' male world. But while the chorus and Phaedra have married and had children, Hippolytus and his companions appear to be frozen in late adolescence. Their lives are a round of hunting and feasting. The messenger's speech conveys touchingly the love of his friends for Hippolytus (1173–80), but they inhabit a disconcertingly antiseptic world. This comes across even in the beautiful lines in which Hippolytus celebrates the virginal meadow in which he has plucked his garland for Artemis (73–87). The passage certainly captivates, but is there something chilling in its sense of exclusiveness? In addition, this male world can find no way of accommodating women, as is communicated most forcefully by the protagonist in his unbalanced rant against

the female sex (614–68). Hippolytus and his friends have yet to complete the rite of passage to adulthood.

The psychologically ring-fenced world in which he lives demands that he suppresses the youthful sexual energy which threatens it. (The dramatist takes the trouble to inform us that Hippolytus does not care for pornographic pictures – on vases? 1003–6.) It is thus entirely appropriate that he should be destroyed by that very element in his persona when the bull, a symbol of rampant male sexuality, erupts from the sea to cause his death.

The virtuous boy pays a terrible price for the incompleteness of his nature which results from his repression of the force represented by Aphrodite. As the Nurse exhilaratingly – and accurately – asserts,

she roams in the air, she is in the surge of the sea, all things are born from her. It is she who sows and gives love and it is through love that everyone of us on earth is created. (447–50)

Bridging two worlds

Yet there are clear indications that, as it proceeds to its terrible conclusion, the play sets out to bridge the gap between its male and female worlds. If Gilbert Murray and James Diggle, the editors of the Oxford Classical Texts, are right in their attribution of parts, the great chorus sung at the very moment of Hippolytus' fatal battering (1102–50) is shared – uniquely in surviving Greek tragedy – between the female and the male chorus. And later Artemis consoles the dying Hippolytus with the promise that

unwed girls will cut their hair in tribute to you before their marriage, and throughout the length of time you will reap your reward from the deepest sorrow of their tears. And the maidens' care for you will always find expression in song... (1425–9)

Indeed there was a cult of Hippolytus for girls in Trozen in Euripides' day.

It may at first sight seem odd that this notable misogynist should be assimilated

into female rites after his death, but then again it may be entirely apt – and strangely reassuring – that through his death the yawning chasm between the male and female worlds that the play has exposed should at last be bridged. Hippolytus wins through to a psychological completeness, even if only in death. At the end, there is tragedy aplenty and we can identify with the cry of the women's chorus that they rage against the gods (1146). But the play has journeyed to the realization that the worlds of men and women must be able to find space for each other, and, considering the abyss that separated those worlds for most of the play's duration, that is a triumph of a kind, however muted.

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